The Comanches

291 After the acquisition of bandannas, the man wore one around his neck. Instead of tying it in front, he used a button made from buffalo bone through which he pulled the ends of the handkerchief. The older men still wear bandannas in this manner.

294 There was a time when the art of sewing was unknown and when garments were tied together at the seams, but in modern times clothing was neatly sewed with sinew thread, which was very stout and durable. Such thread was made from the sinew lying along either side of the spine of the buffalo or deer. It was taken off in long pieces and dried, and strands of it were split off with the finger nails as needed. The strand of thread was then moistened in the mouth and rolled on the knee with the palm of the hand or between the palms, and one end of the thread pointed. With an awl a hole was made in the material, the fine point of the thread was passed through the hole, and the thread pulled through with the fingers.

294 413 Awls and needles were usually made of bone sharpened to a fine point. Steel substitutes were among the first articles traded by the whites to the Indians, but the methods of sewing remained practically unchanged so long as leather was used for clothing. Sewing implements were carried in a small case made of dressed buffalo cow or calfskin tied to the belt. Such cases usually opened at the top with a flap. The awl was also carried by the men as a part of their everyday outfit, since it was an essential tool in their work. The men carried it in a small leather pouch with a flap covering, attached to the wrist by a buckskin thong. Pouches were ornamented with variously colored beads in simple design and sometimes fringed with metal pendants.

291 294 The buffalo robe was a regular part of the wardrobe. Hides for robes were taken during the fall months of November and December. Some robes were prepared with the hair left on for use in extremely cold weather, while others were prepared with the hair removed for milder weather. Some specimens retained the holes around the edge through which pegs were driven in stretching the hide. Minor alterations in shape were made by cutting off the tail and legs and by tucking the ears through slits from the outer to the under side. The Comanche robe was usually made of two separate pieces sewed together down the center, because the buffalo was skinned by cutting

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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down the spine. A very narrow (one-quarter to one-half inch) line of red paint down the middle concealed the stitching. Ordinarily a man's robe had no other decoration. Robes ranged in size from about twenty by thirty-six to approximately seventy-five by one hundred inches.

The robe was one of the warmest and most protective coverings that could be devised against low temperature, for the buffalo in November and December was covered with a dark, seal-brown coat of wool intermixed with hair, which on some of the bulls measured from seventeen to twenty inches in length. Plainsmen and soldiers stationed at the frontier forts claimed that one buffalo robe was warmer than four ordinary blankets. Many overcoats were manufactured by the government from buffalo robes for army men exposed to severe weather during campaigns against the Indians. Lighter robes were also made of bear skin, for which two hides were required, gray wolf, calling for four skins, and coyote, for which eight skins were needed. Rarely, even skunk fur was used. And for babies and children rabbit-skin robes were provided.[24]

There seems to have been no difference in the robes of men and women except that those worn by the wives of great warriors and chiefs were painted.

The eight Comanche robes found by J. C. Ewers in American museums in the nineteen thirties all had the so-called "hour glass" figure in the center. This figure is nothing more than a highly stylized, geometric representation of a buffalo. A geometric border runs around the outside of the field in all the women's robes. In its distribution the Comanche "hour glass" and border design is definitely Southern Plains, for it is shared for the most part only by the Wichitas, Kiowas, Apaches, and Río Grande Pueblos (presumably Taos). The feathered sun symbol, popular on robes to the north, was not used at all by the Comanches. Robes worn by the wives of noted warriors often carried markers symbolizing the coup, or war honors, of their husbands.

The preparation of a Comanche painted robe was a serious undertaking. Usually three or four women worked together under the direction of a skilled and experienced leader. Before the painting was done, they took the gelatinous scrapings from the under side of the

[24] *Ibid.*

3: Wallace & Hoebel E-4, 5 (1933, 1945) 1952
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294 hide and boiled them down in water until the concoction made a glue-like sizing. It was spread over the surface to be decorated and [386] served as a fixer for the paint. The paints, which were mineral pigments in water, were pressed into the hide with the edge of a patella. After the design was completed, the hide was sized once again. Such [428] robes, although they could be buried with the owner at her funeral, were usually inherited by a younger sister.[25]

291 293 Both men and women normally went bareheaded, except in bad weather when the robe was pulled up to form a kind of temporary hood, but in later years many Comanches wore fur caps made of buffalo calf or coyote skins. Warriors sometimes wore a coiffure of buffalo horns or a hood made of the scalp of the buffalo with the horns attached in proper position as a part of their ceremonial attire. For special state or ceremonial occasions, feathers were worn as plumes or woven into a hood or war bonnet. The Indians of the East wore a narrow head band into which feathers were stuck upright, but the Comanches and other Plains Indians wore a kind of cap around which the feathers were placed so as to droop and spread backward, and not infrequently the cap supported a streamer.

293 Clark Wissler believes the war bonnet was not regularly worn prior to the reservation period by the Plains Indians, although by 1834 feathers were worn on the head as a badge of distinguished service throughout a wide area of the Plains.[26] His conclusion regarding the use of feathers by Plains Indians in general is fairly well substantiated by evidence regarding the Comanches. Had the war bonnet been worn, some of the early visitors would certainly have noted it. It was too conspicuous to have been overlooked. David G. Burnet mentioned the buffalo-horn headdress but not the war bonnet. Several accounts relate that feathers, particularly those of the eagle, were worn in the hair by warriors. Captain R. G. Carter, who was with Colonel MacKenzie in the campaigns against the Comanches in the eighteen seventies, was one of the first to mention feathered war bonnets of the "most unique and fantastical designs" as though they were regular and proper dress on special occasions.[27] They certainly never became

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Clark Wissler, *The Relations of Nature to Man in Aboriginal America*, 52–61.

[27] Carter, *On the Border with MacKenzie*, 283.

20: Wallace H-4,5 (1945) 1953 NO6 Comanche NO6

[575] men's clubs in 1935. During the same year the gardening [657] and food preservation clubs preserved enough to have sup- [251] plied every Indian family of the agency with more than 100 quarts of canned fruits, plus 37 pounds of dried fruits and vegetables, with 8½ pounds of cured meat. Child welfare clubs made clothes, studied infant care, and dealt with [342] the problem of child health. Home improvement clubs [353] screened homes, made curtains, planted trees, flowers, and [251] shrubs, and dug cellars for the storage of food. Foods nutri- [252] tion clubs prepared under supervision 3,678 dishes during the year. 4-H Club members canned 837 quarts of food, [251] made 1,183 pieces of clothing, and won two first places and [294] a second place at the state fair.[29]

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[657] Schools for the education of the Indian children of the [871] Kiowa-Comanche Agency have been of three kinds: govern- [874] ment boarding, mission, and state public. The government boarding school pioneered the educational program, provided a vocational training curriculum, and in recent years has [797] become the school for orphans and the destitute. Since the government never intended to establish special schools for all the children, the mission schools rendered invaluable aid during the years preceding the opening of the public schools to them. The majority of children now attend public schools.

[648] The Treaty of Medicine Lodge obligated the federal government to provide instruction for the Indians of the reservation. Congress appropriated a very modest sum for that purpose in 1870, and in the same year Josiah Butler and wife obtained permission to establish an agency school. On February 20, 1871, Butler and his wife opened the first school on the reservation in a thirty by sixty foot building located on the present site of Fort Sill Indian School, with four pupils, all Comanches, in attendance. Butler continued the school until June 27, 1873, but found it very difficult to enforce discipline.[30]

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[113] 29. McCown, *Annual Report: Narrative Section*, 1935, 16-24.
[113] 30. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 1873, 220.

32: Gilles O,X-3 (1902-c.1910) 1974
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camp functioning properly. The tasks were varied and time-consuming, and no one woman could have taken care of all of them.

The warrior-husband was the killer of game, the procurer of buffalo meat, the Comanches' principal source of food. He had to have two sets of trained horses—one trained for war, the other for the killing of buffalo. In either pursuit, his life was largely dependent on the horse. He manufactured both his riding gear and his weapons, and he trained his own horses. His fighting was practically on a twelve-month basis, since, though the Comanches did not like winter fighting, most of the ambitious warriors made raiding expeditions into Old Mexico when the group went into winter camp.

The husband, therefore, could be of little or no help around the camp, and the labor had to be divided among the women. Usually one of the women was an expert horsewoman and had the responsibility of her husband's horse herd, which often numbered a hundred or more. When the fall hunt was on for the winter's supply of meat, the wives did the skinning and butchering. They dried the meat and made the pemmican. Also, they prepared and tanned the hides. After the tanning came the making of clothing. This included everything the family wore, both in summer and winter. Since there was neither needle nor thread, the holes in the leather were made with a stone awl or one made from bone, and sinew taken from along the backbone of a buffalo or deer was used for thread.

Other hides were converted into robes for bedding or into covers for the tepees. When camp was moved, tepees had to be taken down and fastened on travoises, like all the other camp gear, and then camp must be set up again at the new location. All of this was strictly woman's work.

Somewhere, sometime, during breathing spells from all these duties, the women bore babies, nursed them, and raised them to be good Comanches. And all this was in a society without a recognized medium of exchange, in which no one could hire anything done. The Comanches did, however, utilize slave labor. Successful warriors furnished captive women to their wives for helpers. These captive women were given the opportunity to trade their slave status for wifehood, and captive girls were carefully trained to become Comanche wives. Captive boys were trained as warriors to fill the vacancies in the warrior ranks. In addition to members of other tribes, Anglos, Spaniards, and Mexicans were abducted to be made slaves.

32: Gilles O,X-3 (1902-c.1910) 1974
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595 462 went about her tasks cheerfully and willingly. Whichever one of the women divided the labor reserved enough for herself so that she was just as busy as the other women.

857 462 The little girls of the family stayed close to the women the day through, and performed tasks suitable for their ages. But the little boys roamed far and wide, never seeming to have any duties except when they were helping their father with the horses.

521 522 462 [296] [124] During group tasks there was always quite a bit of conversation and considerable laughing. In warm weather the women would go to the creek together, select a place in the shade where the water was about six or eight inches deep, and sit in the water on the sandy bottom to do the family wash. I never learned what the talk and laughter were about, as I was never able to accumulate a squaw vocabulary.

521 562 604 124 [198] (Comanche women held only the most necessary conversation with any man, Indian or white, other than their own menfolks. And while I was generally able to figure out the subject of the men's conversation and follow its progress, I seldom recognized a word used by the women when they conversed among themselves. At times I was inclined to think they even had a different language.)

595 The same air of camaraderie seemed to prevail whenever the wives were together in a group. I noticed it in the store whenever there was only one family present. Their trading done, the wives would draw 516 [352] their chairs into a group and converse. They never had chairs in their camps, but the women never passed up the several chairs we had in the store—although once in a while some quite old squaw would insist on sitting on the floor. If the chairs were all occupied, the women never hesitated to sit on the floor, and the people trading would walk around them.

595 Wherever you saw a man's wives—in town, on the reservation, or at a celebration—they always formed a group. You would not find one wife in a store and another out on the street. Two or more groups of wives would often chat together in the store or sit together in the shade on the reservation or at a powwow.

595 422 294 One custom which seemed odd to me was that of each wife's having her own sewing machine. The sewing done by the average family was not so extensive that one machine would not easily have sufficed. Yet each wife would have her own—something I had been alerted to look for by an article that had appeared in the *Star* commenting that each of Quanah Parker's wives had her individual sewing machine.